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Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot

IAN HARRIS

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot is an impressively well-researched examination of Buddhists and institutionalized Buddhism during the rise, reign, and fall of the Khmer Rouge. Between 2003 and 2007, Ian Harris was a senior scholar at the Documentation Center of Cambodia. This provided him with the opportunity to compile and examine an archive that includes unpublished materials held there, confession documents, reports from Lon Nol's government and those of foreign governments, biographical accounts of Party members and prisoners, soldiers' notebooks, memoirs, information presented at the 1979 trial of Pol Pot, and publications of the Party, including magazines, films, and instructional videos. Additionally, Harris utilizes 87 interviews he conducted or participated in and 34 conducted by others.[1)] From this, Harris discusses widespread horrors perpetrated against Buddhists and members of the *sangha* but argues that the Khmer Rouge themselves used Buddhist concepts, through both adaptation and inversion, to bolster their own ideology. Furthermore, Harris demonstrates that "although Buddhism was in mortal danger during Democratic Kampuchea, it was never totally extinguished, despite the claims of Angkar to the contrary" (p. 139), as individual actors preserved aspects of the tradition and material traces of Buddhism survived.

Harris organizes *Buddhism in a Dark Age* thematically rather than chronologically as he analyzes the decline of the Buddhist state headed by Sihanouk, the development of the communism that would take hold over Cambodia, as well as the treatment of monastics and official Buddhist sites (e.g., pagodas and monasteries) and objects (e.g., monks' robes, Buddha images, and murals) during the time period covered. While focusing primarily on events between 1970 and 1979, Harris references Communist activity as early as the 1930s, and the final chapter is devoted to an examination of post-1979 Cambodia and the installation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which would govern under Vietnamese control until 1989.

1) Sixty-seven of these interviews were conducted by Harris with assistance between 2003 and 2005; 20 were conducted by him alone between 1997 and 2006; and 34 were conducted by others in 1986.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, leading up to the end of French colonialism in 1953, many monks with a left-wing, anticolonial, revolutionary, and nationalist spirit were inspired by the perceived ideals of communism and its compatibility with Buddhism. However, even in the 1950s it was hard for monks to become full members of the Party, and by the 1960s the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) was distancing itself from Buddhism (p. 35). Nonetheless, the National United Front of Kampuchea (FUNK), bolstered by support from Sihanouk, who was regarded by most of the country as a righteous Buddhist ruler, persisted into the 1970s with monastic and lay support from those who thought the CPK would defend Buddhism against foreign aggressors. On the other side, some Buddhists championed the Khmer Republic headed by Lon Nol. Backed by its Vietnamese and Chinese counterparts, the CPK—an early precursor to the Khmer Rouge and of which Pol Pot was a member—led a coup, which would initiate the civil war that engulfed the country for five years leading up to the formal installation of the Khmer Rouge. Eventually, Democratic Kampuchea was founded at the Special National Congress in Phnom Penh held on April 25–27, 1975, after the "liberation" of cities on April 17. Twenty monks joined that delegation, but from that point forward neither monks nor Buddhism would be referenced in radio or other communications: "From the official perspective, they had ceased to exist" (p. 67). Buddhism was listed alongside imperialism and "reactionary capitalism" as one of the "three mountains" in need of complete eradication. However, the means to accomplish this monumental task had yet to be determined, and Buddhism continued in varying degrees throughout the country.

Buddhism in a Dark Age acutely highlights the debates, processes, and inconsistencies that arose as Buddhist practices came to be banned and institutionalized Buddhism abolished. For example, the 1976 revolt of White Khmer or White Scarf Buddhists, members of the Khmer Rouge who wished to keep Buddhist and Khmer customs in place, highlights the tensions within the Party; the leaders of the revolt were subsequently executed and their position overridden by those who sought to model Democratic Kampuchea on the Cultural Revolution in China (p. 42). The Party lost members also with its decision to abolish the monkhood. On the other hand, as communism was rising to prominence, there were "revolutionary monks" who actively recruited, propagandized, and spied for the Party.[2] In fact, in 1973 they formed an alternative *sangha* administration, the Patriotic Monks Association, on behalf of the Communists and in opposition to the traditional, ecclesiastical order centered in the capital (pp. 69–72).

What is poignantly revealed throughout *Buddhism in a Dark Age* is that in the face of unimaginable hardship, some Buddhists, usually in secret and always at great personal risk, were able to demonstrate unwavering perseverance and maintain a small semblance of their previous monastic vocation, cherished religious beliefs, or treasured objects. To this end, the reader is privileged to a variety of short glimpses into the lives of those who lived, and often died, during the period.

2) There were common reports of "monks" with guns, and one who purportedly preached rebirth in heaven for anyone who caught members of the Lon Nol regime (p. 71).

Harris writes:

> At the local level, policies were implemented in one of two ways, either dogmatically and with ill-considered fervor or in ways that still left scope for determined individuals, sometimes with the connivance of sympathetic officials, to maintain a minimal level of religiosity. (p. 117)

Thus, where there was room, brave and creative actors exploited the "chaotic nature of the regime" and lack of organized directives, and found ways to preserve their tradition (p. 117). For example, after being forced to disrobe,[3] some men maintained their connection to Buddhism and the monkhood through the materiality of their robes—both symbols of Buddhism and physical harbingers of "magical properties"—by hiding them or even wearing pieces that they had dyed black. Interestingly, while the Khmer Rouge was intent on destroying the institution of Buddhism, healing and protection rituals were common (p. 98). Reports also indicate that some monks performed rituals or led groups in chanting, and if the local official allowed it, elderly monks were able to remain in white robes. Other Buddhists are said to have practiced "in their minds" only, recited nightly prayers, or managed to keep small images of the Buddha hidden. In an ingenious act, Buddhist murals were sometimes covered and protected with charcoal combined with rice porridge, a mixture that hid the images but which could be easily removed later (p. 115). There is no doubt, however, that the majority of previously devout Buddhists completely abandoned their religious lives—"A decision born of rationality and fear in equal measure, it certainly increased one's chances of survival" (p. 117).

By the early 1960s Khmer communism was becoming more opposed to Buddhism, and by 1975 "hard-line antireligious zealots reigned virtually unopposed." However, Harris argues, "a bricolage of protestantized and rationalistic Buddhist categories, concepts, and practices retained a place in the movement's ideology and continued to inform its actions" (p. 42). Thus, while the Communists eagerly pointed out that monks failing to contribute to production were a drain on the economy, they were simultaneously unable to rid themselves of all the Buddhist categories and concepts integral to their worldview. Further, in co-opting certain Buddhist ideas and ideals, the Khmer Rouge sought to undermine the authority of monks and instill fear in those who wished to remain committed to their Buddhist principles (p. 4). For example, to show they were due more respect than monks, revolutionaries were to abide by a list of rules (*vinay ankār*) longer than that prescribed by the Buddhist *Vinaya*. Additionally, among their propaganda techniques was the inclusion of extensive lists and repetition, a common trope of Buddhist preaching.

In some ways, the Khmer Rouge enacted a type of barbarous, forced asceticism on the people

3) Most men disrobed rather than resist, but it "appears that by far the most common cause of violent death in the *sangha* was a refusal to disrobe" (p. 123). Harris also found evidence of "some reluctance [on the part of the executioners] to desecrate the orange robe, an object that had traditionally been the locus of both respect and occult power" (p. 124).

of Cambodia. Taking from the Buddhist tradition, Harris suggests, all were expected to live an extreme version of various monastic ideals regarding the renunciation of worldly goods, family ties, and emotions, especially useful in getting ordinary folks to turn in "enemies." Moreover, the consumption of alcohol was demonized, perfumes and jewelry banned, short hair for both sexes mandated, and severe restrictions on inappropriate interactions with the opposite sex put in place. In accordance with the latter rule, forced marriage was a common practice to authorize reproduction, although overwork, malnutrition, and trauma severely hampered fertility. Monasteries that survived the heavy artillery bombing of the region were no longer places of devotion or monastic quarters and instead were turned into military bases, arms depots, officer training schools, storage and medical facilities, bureaucratic offices, or vehicle repair shops. Monastic grounds were used also to raise crops and animals. Others were simply dismantled for their composite materials. Monasteries served as "good barracks and good prisons," as Harris writes, their "widespread use as workshops of torture and execution chillingly reinforcing the traditional association of Buddhism and death" (pp. 108–109).

The historical and political complexities involved in the periods covered by the book—pre-1970 through the Cambodian Civil War into the reign of the Khmer Rouge, and then through the eventual fall of the PRK in the late 1980s—may make portions of the book hard to follow for those unfamiliar with the region and time. Moreover, since the book focuses on novices and monks, as the title aptly suggests, the reader is privy only to the opinions on and impact of communism from a male perspective. Nonetheless, *Buddhism in a Dark Age* is a welcome supplement to other studies on the Khmer Rouge and the rise of communism in Southeast Asia, as Harris adds nuance to our historical understanding of the role of Buddhism and Buddhists during these times. He also demonstrates that disentangling the Buddhist worldview from the ruinous ideology that devastated Cambodia is, perhaps, more difficult than many would like to assume.

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The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century

Patrick F. Campos

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016.

Patrick Campos's groundbreaking book *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century* tries to make sense of the complexities and intricacies of the metamorphosing Philippine cinema on the brink of the twenty-first century, interrogating the positionality of national cinema and the concept of independence within the interlocking global, transnational, and regional